

Charity Head Admits Funding Fighters, Not Al Qaeda
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By Andrew Stern

CHICAGO (Reuters) - The head of a U.S.-based Muslim charity charged with funding al Qaeda on Monday pleaded guilty only to funneling money to Muslim fighters in Chechnya (news - web sites) and Bosnia after reaching a deal with prosecutors.

Syrian-born Enaam Arnaout, 41, and his charity, Benevolence International Foundation, were originally accused of passing millions of dollars in donations to Osama bin Laden (news - web sites)'s al Qaeda network, blamed for the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

But his guilty plea entered in court, part of a plea deal with federal prosecutors, related to misleading donors by sending money his lawyer said totaled a few hundred thousand dollars to Chechen and Bosnian fighters.

"This plea agreement shows that this defendant and this charity had nothing to do with al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden," Arnaout's lawyer Joseph Duffy said.

Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, who has won convictions in the bombings of the World Trade Center in 1993 and U.S. embassies in East Africa in 1998, said however it was wrong to interpret the plea deal as a disavowal of links to Al Qaeda.

"Did we in any way walk away from our contention that Benevolence International was intertwined with Al Qaeda? Not on your life," said Fitzgerald, the U.S. Attorney in Northern Illinois. "That is 100 percent wrong." Fitzgerald said evidence of Arnaout's role in helping Al Qaeda would likely be presented at his sentencing hearing, which has not been set. [emphasis added]

He said evidence included testimony by former Al Qaeda members about bin Laden's use of charities to disguise the network's finances, Al Qaeda training videotapes prominently displaying the charity's logo, and photographs of Arnaout with bin Laden.

The defense has said any ties between Arnaout and bin Laden date to the Afghan war against Soviet occupation, when Muslim fighters were supported by the United States.

In pleading guilty before U.S. District Court judge Suzanne Conlon to racketeering conspiracy, money laundering and mail and wire fraud, Arnaout faces sentence of up to 20 years in prison and a fine up to \$250,000.

HELPED BOSNIANS AND CHECHENS

Arnaout admitted to helping fund purchases of boots, tents, uniforms and an ambulance for Bosnian Muslims fighting Serbs, and boots for Chechen fighters battling Russian troops.

Defense attorneys said the amount of money funneled for these purposes amounted to no more than \$300,000 out of some \$20 million in donations that went to worthy causes.

The defense said one factor in deciding to plead guilty was whether, if the case went to trial, it would be possible to find an impartial jury in a case involving terrorism and an Arab American. Arnaout has been in custody since April.

Fitzgerald vehemently disputed that Arnaout would not have received a fair hearing and said he could reduce his sentence if he fulfilled his pledge to cooperate with investigators.

He said Arnaout could provide information that could lead to further prosecutions and unravel the ties between Al Qaeda and Muslim relief agencies like Benevolence International.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft traveled to Chicago last year to announce the charges against Arnaout, denouncing Al Qaeda's use of charities to commingle millions of dollars in contributions to hide the true purpose of the fund-raising.

On Monday, Ashcroft called Arnaout's guilty plea "a strong outcome" for the case, and said his cooperation will help in the "critical investigation into the funding of violence and violent acts overseas."

"We will shut down terrorist funding sources, we will ensure that terrorist sympathizers who fund violence or terrorism will meet swift or certain justice," he told reporters in Washington.

The original seven-count indictment described alleged links between Arnaout and a wide range of Muslim militants including bin Laden. He originally faced a possible 90 years in prison without chance of parole.

The charity's suburban Chicago headquarters was raided and its assets frozen in December 2001. Its offices in Bosnia provided a trove of documents and photographs that prosecutors said linked the charity with Al Qaeda.

In January some of the largest U.S. corporations were found to have made donations to Benevolence International through matching contributions made by their employees before Arnaout was indicted last year.